

Polish-style queer, or: the modern closet

Anna Laszuk

{Reprinted from *Furia* I (December 2009) <http://furia.org.pl>}

I'll start from fairly recent times, when following the publication of my book "Dziewczyny, wyjdźcie z szafy!" {Girls, come out of the closet}[1] I kept hearing that some readers who belong to the so-called heterosexual majority have trouble understanding the title, because they associate the word "closet" only with a place to hang clothes. This is somewhat surprising in Poland, where the closet should be associated - quite literally - with a place for hiding Jews. Yet when I referred to this historical experience, people were indignant and told me I had abused the term (even though I had not attempted to compare the Jewish experience during the Holocaust with the oppression of lesbians in Poland today; I had only referred to the function of this particular piece of furniture). According to the dictionary of sexual minorities, the "closet" is associated with the taboo place where skeletons are kept. Thus the trope leads us to the English-speaking world, where the phrase "skeleton in the closet" was adapted to refer to a homosexual person's closeted life. I came

to understand this trope thanks to Błażej Warkocki, whose excellent text "Otwieranie toalety" {Opening the water closet} was published in *Res publica nova* in 2002.[2] But the Polish equivalents of "living in the closet" and "coming out of the closet" had been used in homosexual circles for years, and were perfectly understandable. Perhaps the difference is one of experience - the person who has never lived in the closet does not have easy access to this basic code.

Despite the temporary confusion, Polish discourse absorbed "life in the closet" and "coming out of the closet" fairly quickly as synonyms for acts of concealing and revealing associated with homosexual people. This happened not only because of the increased interest in homosexuality in recent years but also because the two handy phrases were picked up by the media. They proved very useful since the number of coming-outs increased. Yet the popularity of the closet as a place to be or not be in is one thing, and the popularity of the idea of "coming-out" is quite another. "Did the girls come out of the closet?" - people asked me ad nauseam, till I was tempted to reply: "How am I supposed to know?" I was angry that I was being treated as a sort of lesbian statistical bureau and a bank of lesbians who had come out, particularly by people seeking lesbians for a TV program or an article on les-maternity, or a documentary, or something else still. At the same time, these were optimistic signals; the times of

representing lesbians in the media as two-headed calves had come to an end; journalists began to approach the issue with due seriousness; only the problem of coming out in the public sphere remained. Many women emailed me to say that the book had given them confidence, so that they were finally able to come out, feel free and breathe deeply. But they had no intention of talking about it on TV, the radio, or in the press, which may be interpreted as a reluctance to go public and women's general shyness when it comes to public appearances. It is also understandable in view of the commonness of partial or gradual coming-outs: among friends - yes, but at work - no, at school - no problem, but not at home, depending on whom we trust, where and where we feel safe, what we hope to avoid, what we need to keep under control, however illusory it might be. As for public figures, coming out of the closet did not catch on, least of all among the women. Women politicians, actresses, women journalists, business women, women scholars - hello, are there any lesbians out there?

Unexpectedly, though there have been no coming-outs on a mass scale, here and there the idea is becoming *passe*. I am not thinking here about those circles where everything that is not hetero is automatically *passe*, but about the LGBT movement itself (and, more specifically, about some of the female activists, students of lesbian and gender studies, or young women who hang out with the

LGBT crowd. The same holds true for men). Today it is better to be "queer" - for whatever that world may mean, it is trendy. The problem is not that one concept goes out of style (I can only comment ironically on the fact that it never was in style in Poland) while another becomes fashionable, but that these phenomena have political significance. What significance? Let me start with an interview with Agnieszka Kłos conducted by Wojciech Staszewski and published in *Lampa* (7/2009). In the course of this interview, Staszewski comments on Kłos's prose (which abounds in women desiring women) to conclude: "And then the little girl grows up and becomes a lesbian," to which Kłos replies:

No-one before you has asked me about my sexual orientation. The homosexuality you discover as a reader is just another mask which we have to closely examine from a linguistic and social perspective, since this mask has already become demeaning. It has become schematic, just like the macho mask. Long ago, I discovered a certain aspect of my personality which might be defined as homosexuality. But I have since lost interest in this aspect of myself - expressed, experienced, and examined. It was important for me while I was writing but now it's lost its power. While writing the book I went through a period of sexualizing the world. I was alternately consumed by epidemics of desire and sadness. Meanwhile, a wave of interest in the Other swept across Poland. . . . Would I call myself

a lesbian? No. For me it is much more important that culturally I'm male rather than female.

Does this mean that the cultural male no longer sexualizes the world? In my view he certainly continues to do so, and if at the same time he says that homosexuality is a calcified mask, my suspicion is aroused. But let sleeping males lie; that is not why I'm picking apart Kłos's statement, which thoroughly confused me. I somehow did not register the wave of interest in the Other which supposedly swept across Poland (perhaps it swept across the humanities departments at some universities, and only on the theoretical level); nor do I see the demeaning or schematic quality of some lesbian mask. What I find problematic is the way Kłos treats her own (and other people's) homosexual "aspect." While I have nothing against her writing about lesbian desire as a cultural male, I object to the patronizing treatment of the lesbian figure by someone who stands on the very side of the barricade that often gets treated patronizingly. I know that, in contrast to being a lesbian, today it is attractive to be queer. Why attractive? Because in addition to being trendy (made in the USA) queer rejects gender and sexual orientation as identity categories.[3] For many this is liberating. It liberates them from having to fit into the paradigm of femininity (or masculinity), hetero-, homo- and bisexuality, and, ultimately, everything else. I'm afraid that in our time and place it also liberates them from politics. Yet

originally queer was not apolitical.

Significantly, when the queer theory and practice began to displace identity categories in the US, its function was, on the one hand, to valorize such marginalized categories as bisexuality, transsexuality, and transgender, and, on the other, to work against the strong homo-hetero polarization which had been widely (and wrongly) considered natural. Therefore queer theory undermined scientific identity categories and in practice was a response to the strong identity politics of the lesbian and gay movement (which failed to recognize differences within its ranks), as well as to exclusions within feminism. Queer became politicized by joining the struggle on the side of the radical movement ACT UP[4] (at a time when the AIDS epidemic struc far and wide), by provocatively showing the middle finger to the majority: "We Are Here, We Are Queer, Get Fucking Used to It!" To feel just how provocative that slogan was we would have to shout out the Polish equivalent in the Krakow Market Square or in front of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw, but the word "queer" would have to be replaced by a Polish word like "pervert." That would really be something. But it is unlikely to happen because in addition to the very different political situations in Poland and in the US, the word "queer" has never been adequately translated into Polish, so it does not get translated at all. All equivalents, roughly meaning "peculiar," "pervert," "weird," and "changeling" failed to catch on, leaving

queer... queer and therefore a word without meaning, worse, a word which de-politicizes and can be deciphered only by the initiated. Queer lost its force, demonstrators do not put it on their banners; it has found a safe nook somewhere between the university library and the fashionable urban club.[5] Ironically, it has become a vehicle of liberation largely for white middle-class intellectuals, and in its pop/snob version - a new gadget that allows people to escape the stigmatization that comes with being associated with the word gay, lesbian, bisexual, or any other word that refers to non-heterosexuality in Polish. We are therefore left without a word to take out into the streets (which is what Queer Nation did[6]), let alone to break into mass culture or advertising with, for the word "queer" doesn't shout - it's mute. In contrast to its intended use, for it is, after all, a term of abuse transformed into pleasure, a word taken out of the enemy's mouth, the affirmation of "fag" or "dyke" and other "perverts." In the Polish language sphere, the best instance of reclaiming the language of the victimized (specifically in the public space) were the slogans of a recent poster campaign organized by the Campaign Against Homophobia: "What are you staring at, dyke?!"

"What are you staring at, fag?!"[7] It is worth mentioning that the posters did not originate with the Polish queer movement, since there is none such, but with the identity-based lesbian and gay movement). Below the offensive slogans in the posters there were

captions: "Dyke/Fag! I hear it every day. Hate hurts. Signed: Campaign Against Homophobia." (Not everyone got the message.) The pioneering use of hostile speech in our own cause was definitely radical, but neither "dyke" nor "fag" were used in the affirmative sense; they served a moralizing function. The difference between these two uses is enormous: American activists named themselves - almost joyfully - "perverts,"[8] while the campaign Against Homophobia attempted to shame those who use the words as terms of abuse, by holding up a mirror to them. The poster campaign evoked mixed feelings and was not legible. Some viewers assumed it was yet another discriminating advertisement of some mysterious product to be revealed in subsequent posters. Sometimes the posters were recognized as part of a social campaign against discrimination, usually causing embarrassment, though, rather than appreciation. Some failed to see the point (how can an LGBT organization abuse its own members?), others were offended (at a campaign that reinforces the very language it wants to delegitimize), while many shrugged, either with a typically Polish lack of concern or because they "happened" to use the hateful words from the posters.

In contrast to KPH's assimilationist poster campaign "Let Them See Us"[9] (which said: we are ordinary, we're normal, in fact we're just like you), the "What are you staring at, fag?!" "What are you staring at,

dyke?!" posters came closer to the righteous indignation which we have never dared to express. I have often wondered what it would take to make us act up. More slurs? More discrimination? More invisibility? More demeaning abuse? We have known the assimilationist-persuasive "We Are Everywhere" (in opposition to which came the explosion "We Are Here, We Are Queer, Get Fucking Used to It!") since the beginning of the LGBT movement. Yes, we're everywhere. We're your neighbors, your daughters, your sons, your sisters and brothers. We're just like you. Normal. How pleasant such claims sound - yet they do not result in any significant rise in acceptance or social support for our rights. They do not challenge the imagined normalcy or the imagined deviance. However, we do not need "queer" to end the squabbling over who is normal. We don't need a word which hardly anyone understands, we don't need the dismantling of identities which have not had the time to establish themselves. We need effectiveness. If we want the effectiveness of queer in Polish, perhaps we should aim for its original fury? Yes, we're here, fags, dykes, trances of all persuasions. We perverts are here and get fucking used to it! I feel shiver of pleasure when I imagine that I am shouting these words out with you. It has never happened. There is little hope that it ever will (for many reasons I discuss elsewhere). If queer exacerbates the invisibility of perverts, acting as the contemporary closet, the chances that it will happen are very low.

I have never had the impression that any identity categories were particularly popular in Poland other than the heterosexual "real woman" and the heterosexual "real man." I do not see any strong politics other than the conservative-nationalist kind, which stands on guard of uniformly brave Poles and obedient Polish Mothers. So instead of breaking up the already weak LGBT movement from within by calling for the dismantling of identity categories of gender and sexuality, perhaps it is better to finally express the difference within its ranks. To win space rather than to back out onto a snobbish margin. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and transgender community suffers less on account of internal marginalization than it does on account of its small size, conformity, fear, and the avoidance of politics by those who are not engaged. It also suffers from the fact that more of those who are not engaged prefer to be "above" rather than to risk being inside. The editors of *Furia Pierwsza* (7/2000) [10] wrote in the introduction: "can we skip a stage in the struggle for homosexual people's visibility and assimilation, can we discard it and immerse ourselves in the all-affirming phenomenon called *queer*? Or must we go through the stage of shaping the homosexual social identity in order to then contest and deconstruct it through queer theory and practice?" After ten years of being a lesbian, feminist, activist, and journalist here in Poland, I answer: as it turns out, we don't have to do anything. For no-one will force us to be brave, to take a stand, to take political initiative, to take responsibility for

ourselves and our relationships, our homo-families. And if, from time to time, we feel forced to do anything, it is emigration west, where people like us have an easier life.

Queer was not invented as a new, more capacious and better - because less legible - grab bag but that is how it is being used. I understand the liberating power of dismantling categories by means of new words, ideas, new "umbrella terms." It so happens that categories (including those "umbrella terms") always bring into being an undesirable and unexpected order. Categories serve social communication rather than our own sense of well-being. Let's leave them all - why shouldn't we? I am fairly indifferent towards categories, but never towards the reality. I invariably hope that we will all care more about the reality than about escaping from it. So before we all immerse ourselves in the "queer phenomenon affirming all difference," let us consider for a moment that we might drown in it, or get locked into the modern Polish-style closet.

[1] Wydawnictwo Lorga, 2006.

[2] Res Publica Nowa 9/2002.

[3] Zdaję sobie sprawę, że wśród czytelniczek/czytelników

pierwszego numeru czasopisma Furia będą osoby, które o queer wiedzą wszystko, lub prawie wszystko, jak też takie, które stykają się z tym pojęciem po raz pierwszy. Wobec tego wyjaśniam fragmentarycznie to, co wydało mi się w niniejszym tekście niezbędne, a zainteresowanych problematyką queer odsyłam choćby do Furii Pierwszej 7/2000, gdzie o teorii i praktyce queer pioniersko pisali Joanna Mizielińska i Darek Balejko. W języku polskim o zjawisku queer pisał m.in. Tomasz Basiuk w Homofobia po polsku (Sic! 2003), a Joanna Mizielińska -bardzo obszernie- w książce Płeć, ciało, seksualność - od feminizmu do teorii queer (Universitas, 2006).

[4] ACT UP - AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. Amerykański ruch zawiązany w 1987 roku, działający w przestrzeni publicznej i teatralizujący działania polityczne. Nawiązywał do idei nieposłuszeństwa obywatelskiego, jego znakiem graficznym był różowy trójkąt uzupełniony napisem Silence = Death. Więcej w: Homofobia po polsku (Sic! 2003), w rozdziale Tomasza Basiuka "Niech nas usłyszają. Słuszny gniew jako strategia zwalczania homofobii w strefie publicznej".

[5] O tym, a także innych polskich (nad)użyciach queer pisała Joanna Mizielińska w Płeć, ciało, seksualność - od feminizmu do teorii queer (Universitas, 2006) w rozdziale "Polskie spotkanie

z teorią queer".

[6] Queer Nation - nowojorska grupa utworzona w 1990 roku u boku ACT UP, również działająca na ulicy, w przestrzeni publicznej, konsekwentnie odrzucająca strategię asymilacyjną na rzecz żądania uznania swojej obecności.

[7] Chodzi o część akcji KPH "Homofobia, tak to wygląda", wpisaną w kampanię "Każdy inny, wszyscy równi".

[8] Osobiście uważam "zboczeńców" za najlepszy - mimo wszystko - polski odpowiednik "queer" w liczbie mnogiej. W liczbie pojedynczej jednak najtrafniejsze wydają mi się zakorzenione w polszczyźnie i obraźliwe: "pedał" oraz "lesba". Nie funkcjonują bowiem jako kategorie tożsamości, ale jako stygmaty seksualności podejrzanej i nieakceptowalnej.

[9] W akcji "Niech Nas Zobaczą" datującej się na rok 2003 wykorzystano fotografie par jedнопłciowych. Trzymających się za ręce, uśmiechniętych młodych kobiet i młodych mężczyzn.

[10] Tamże, s. 5.

Anna Laszuk